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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001157

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DOE FOR CAROLYN GAY

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: SENATOR NELSON MEETS WITH PRESIDENT

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Classified By: Ambassador John J. Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b & d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On June 2, Senator Bill Nelson met with Nigerian newly-elected President Umaru Musa Yar'adua. Yar'adua said that poverty alleviation is a priority in his administration in order to stop the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. He looked forward to greater intelligence cooperation between the U.S. and Nigeria. In addition, Yar'adua said he would place addressing legitimate grievances in the Niger Delta as a national priority and support electoral reforms. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Senator Nelson traveled to Abuja accompanied by Mrs. Grace Nelson, Chief of Staff Pete Mitchell and Staff Member on the Senate Select Committee for Intelligence Caroline Tess. Senator Nelson met with President Yar'adua and representatives of the Nigerian State Security Service and National Intelligence Agency.

SIT DOWN WITH YAR'ADUA

¶3. (C) On June 2, Senator Nelson, Ambassador Campbell, Mrs. Nelson, Pete Mitchell, Caroline Tess and EconOff (notetaker) met with President Yar'adua in the residence at the Presidential Villa. The meeting took place four days after the inauguration. Senator Nelson congratulated President Yar'adua on his inauguration and praised the leadership of the Nigerian State Security Services and National Intelligence Agency, with whom he had met, for their cooperation with U.S. intelligence agencies.

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS

¶4. (C) Senator Nelson noted that al-Qa'ida (AQ) presented a problem for both countries and that working together would be important to prevent AQ from attacking oil facilities in the Niger Delta. President Yar'adua said that U.S. and Nigerian intelligence agencies are cooperating "very well" and that he is also highly concerned about the threat of Islamic fundamentalists. He said that further U.S. assistance and intelligence sharing could help contain the threat. President Yar'adua explained that during his eight-year term

as governor of Katsina state, he tried hard to prevent the spread of fundamentalism. He lamented that in Kano State fundamentalists had "infiltrated" the province during the elections and caused violence. President Yar'adua underscored that the spread of fundamentalism in Nigeria could be "devastating" and that poverty provides fertile ground. He stressed that part of his plan to address the spread of fundamentalism included programs aimed at lessening poverty.

NIGER DELTA

¶5. (C) President Yar'adua opined that an AQ attack in the Niger Delta, would cause serious trouble to the Nigerian government (GON). Senator Nelson concurred and added it is in both countries interest to stop AQ. The Senator remarked that during his three-day-visit to Nigeria, at least 16 expats had been kidnapped in the Niger Delta, including women and children. President Yar'adua responded that the Niger Delta is a major problem and he plans to invite all the major stakeholders to a meeting to create a national strategic plan for development. He hoped to gain the trust of the people in the Niger Delta and make the area less conducive to criminality.

¶6. (C) Following the creation of a Niger Delta strategic development plan, the President contended it would be vetted in the National Assembly to build a national consensus on action. President Yar'adua said it was a past mistake of the GON to not develop a national consensus on solutions for the Delta. He commented that it would take time for local communities with genuine grievances to shift support from the "militants" to the GON.

¶7. (C) President Yar'adua contended that the current policy of companies to pay ransoms for hostages only encourages criminals in the Niger Delta. He commented that the GON must

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improve its intelligence and military capabilities to locate and destroy criminal elements operating in the Niger Delta. He added that oil bunkering also supports the militants' activities and must be stopped.

ELECTORAL CHALLENGES

¶8. (C) A major issue remaining was Nigeria's need for a credible electoral system that follows the rule of law, said President Yar'adua. He maintained that the back and forth of the past 40 years had left Nigeria devoid of strong institutions, but this most recent election had fused democracy and free market principles for the first time. President Yar'adua said that during his term "we need to get it right." He expressed disappointment with the April elections and said he had expected a better process. He suggested that so many institutions are handicapped due to corruption that disrespect for law and order permeate the landscape.

¶9. (C) President Yar'adua told the Senator that he plans to make the Independent National Electoral Commission truly independent by removing administrative and budget control of INEC from the executive branch. He underscored that electoral changes will take time, but he wants Nigeria to meet minimum international standards for all future elections.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) President Yar'adua appeared relaxed but with a persistent cough during the meeting. At this early stage of his Presidency it is unclear whether Yar'adua is willing and able to tackle one of the most difficult issues facing Nigeria.

¶11. (U) Senator Nelson cleared this cable.
CAMPBELL